



# Lessons Learned from an International and Interdisciplinary Virtual Mobility Module between Albania, Slovenia, and Germany

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**Purpose:** After piloting an international and interdisciplinary Virtual Mobility module with eight participating institutions, the experiences will be processed as pedagogical patterns in OER format to facilitate future implementation.

**Study design/methodology/approach:** The lessons learned from the executing institution's perspective will be presented from the perspective of the module supervisor as well as two experienced e-tutors who were involved in the design, implementation and evaluation and were generated through their reflections of them.

**Findings:** The lessons learned focus on improving the organization of international e-tutor teams, the dropout management in group work with several institutions, and adapting the e-tutor qualification to enable adequate and qualitative equal support of all participants.

**Originality/value:** Based on the findings of the Albanian needs report, Virtual Mobility modules have been implemented marginally in the Albanian HEI landscape so far. Thus, the experiences from the pilot are of particular importance for the further multiplication and improvement of the internationalization of Albanian HEIs.

## 1. Introduction

In addition to physical mobility, Virtual Mobility (VM) and Internationalization at Home (IaH) are increasingly seen as strategically essential concepts in the focus of Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) (Almeida et al., 2019). However, experiences of students with Virtual Mobility and Internationalization at home activities are rare within the Albanian Higher Education system. Directly at the beginning of the COVID pandemic, a survey from Vladi et. Al (2020) showed that only 19% of the surveyed Albanian teaching staff estimates that they have the competencies to arrange and implement international modules. Despite the growing need for local and international modules with the use of ICT in Albania, it is also a target of the Digital Education Action Plan to foster the exchange at the EU level (European Commission, 2020). In particular, the digital competence of Academic Staff and the acceptance of this urgently need improvement (Miço & Cungu, 2022). In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic as a catalyst, benchmarking with international partners has also demonstrated such necessity (Miço & Cungu, 2022, Vladi et al., 2020). The Albanian government, as well as the HEIs, are obliged to focus their financial and political investments on the establishment of digitalized education as a standard tool for the future integration of their students into a global economy with a high demand for digital competencies (Kaminska et al. 2022; Miço & Cungu, 2022). The following lessons learned contribution reflects the experience gained in a Virtual Mobility module conducted as the final activity of the VALEU-X Capacity project. After the 6 Albanian HEI partners piloted the Virtual Collaborative Learning Framework locally at their institutions, they participated together with a partner from Slovenia and a partner from Germany in the

design and implementation of an interdisciplinary and international digital case study according to the Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) Framework so that the kickoff event could be organized with over 100 students from 8 participating institutions. The following chapter explains the basic concepts first, followed by a presentation of the influencing projects and the jointly conducted case study. Afterwards, challenges during the implementation are described, and the pedagogical patterns derived from them are presented. Finally, the paper concludes with hints for the future design and improvement of digital modules in and with Albanian HEIs.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### Virtual Mobility

The term "Virtual Mobility" describes cross-border educational exchange that is organised not through time spent physically abroad but through participation in networks and communities, underpinned by flexible technologies and involving students and institutions from various countries (Villar-Onrubia, D., & Rajpal, 2016). Hence, Virtual Mobility provides opportunities for students, who for some reason are not able to participate in the physical intercultural exchange or travel extensively, to benefit from internationalization (Otto, 2018). Moreover, Altmann & Clauss (2020) and Tereseviciene et al. (2013) highlight that Virtual Mobility has the purpose of allowing students to enhance interpersonal and intercultural skills through participation in trans-border online projects by expanding their cultural and social boundaries. This leads to the fact that within Virtual Mobility, cultural content receives the same importance as academic one (Tereseviciene et al., 2013). Furthermore, Virtual Mobility takes place immediately and enables collaborative learning via online platforms (Altmann & Clauss, 2020). It offers intercultural exchange that is developed by more than one host university and remains integrated into the regular local studies with the possibility of obtaining ECTS credits (Altmann & Clauss, 2020; Tereseviciene et al., 2013). Tereseviciene et al. (2013) stress the fact that Virtual Mobility is not only about enabling exchange between students from different countries, cultures, and social backgrounds but also between students from different fields and disciplines.

### Internationalization at Home

Since its inclusion in the European Policy Statement, Internationalization at Home (IaH) has attracted burgeoning academic interest. This concept was first defined two centuries ago by Crowther et al. (2001) as "any internationally related activity with the exception of outbound student and staff mobility" (Crowther et al., 2001: 8). Later on, Knight (2006) stated in her research that Internationalization at Home (IaH) consists of activities that support students' growth in global awareness and intercultural competence. Adding on, this can be organised by including international and multicultural components in the study curriculum for the students (Knight, 2006). Beelen & Leask (2011) support previous research and refer to IaH as a set of tools and activities that all students can engage in at home to foster their development as global and multicultural citizens. Such activities can include, for example, international case studies, guest lecturers from foreign businesses and international partner universities, and virtual collaboration (Beelen & Jones, 2015).

### Virtual Collaborative Learning

The Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) Framework is used to design and deliver local and international purely online group work for students at HEIs. The workload of one module equals 5 ECTS points which can be recognized at the home institution of the participating students based on the individual assessment regulations (Altmann & Clauss, 2020). The framework is under constant development and is built on four design dimensions which will be presented in the following (Schoop et al. 2021).

Using a technical platform for collaboration is crucial to offer students a user-friendly and powerful learning environment (Altmann & Clauss, 2020; Schoop et al., 2021). Besides the communication features like audio and video chat as well as single, group and overall communication channels, further requirements for online collaboration must be met. A cloud-based document space and the possibility for every student to use the range of Microsoft 365 (Word, Powerpoint, Excel, and further tools) allows proper collaboration and equal conditions in terms of software availability. This leads to a broader spectrum of possible tasks to be assigned in case-based learning, as the lecturer can expect that every group has access to the same software (Schoop et al. 2021).

To complement the digital learning environment, realistic and collaborative case studies are designed specifically for the context of the topic and culture of the VCL. The case study covers a period of 6 to 10 weeks. The task packages are processed and handed in on a weekly basis. The groups are completely free in their time allocation within the individual task packages. In addition to the content-focused learning objectives that are included according to the context of the case study, students also acquire competencies in the areas of project management, project documentation, collaboration in virtual teams, and intercultural (Altmann & Clauss, 2020; Schoop et al. 2021). The solution of the case study is left open and challenges the students' creativity and ability to innovate (Schoop et al. 2021).

To allow the students to work on the case study properly despite the openness of the tasks and the platform just described, they are supervised by qualified e-tutors. These are present in the virtual working environments of the groups and contact persons for questions and problems. Furthermore, based on your observation of the group work, it is your task to intervene and moderate in case of conflict (Altmann & Clauss, 2020; Langesee, 2022). Finally, the e-tutors document the weekly group work and provide appropriate feedback to the groups according to an iteratively developed guideline for giving formative feedback in virtual learning arrangements (Altmann, 2022).

Finally, since 2020, the VCL framework has been complemented by a chatbot that provides e-tutors with relevant information about student activity and usage patterns. This can be a supporting component, especially when deciding on an intervention. In doing so, the e-tutor should still act as the primary decision-maker. Still, it significantly reduces the supervision overhead in terms of scaling the module in terms of the number of participants and supervision capacity. In addition, students can reflect on their weekly usage patterns through the data provided by the chatbot (Schoop et al., 2021).

### Pedagogical Patterns

The concept of patterns was introduced by Christopher Alexander, an architect, who states in one of his works that a pattern "describes a problem which occurs over and over again in our environment, and then describes the core of the solution to that problem, in such a way that you can use this solution a million times over, without ever doing it the same way twice" (Alexander et al., 1977: X). Hence, pedagogical patterns capture a well-proven experience in a particular domain into a concise format that may be easily communicated to collaborating institutions that require information on how to solve a reoccurring problem. Also, these enable easy transferability of experience and encapsulate best teaching practices (Alexander et al., 1977).

## 3. Project Description

### VALEU-X

The "Virtual Albanian Universities eXchange" (VALEU-X) project is an Erasmus+ Capacity Building project funded by the European Union. It is running from January 2020 to January

2023 with the aim of implementing Virtual Mobility and Internationalization at Home activities as an affordable instrument to realize international exchange experiences in Albania for students and academic staff. The Consortium consists of 6 Albanian HEIs and 3 EU partners from Slovenia, Italy and Germany who have planned, designed, and realized 10 VCL modules locally and internationally. Furthermore, 36 Albanian students were qualified as e-tutors in virtual and on-site workshops. More than 100 academic staff were trained on Virtual Mobility and Internationalization at Home, quality assurance in International projects, and developing new project proposals at the six partner HEIs. Finally, the experience of creating Virtual Mobility modules using the VCL framework is preserved in Pedagogical patterns and is publicly available at <http://patterns.valeu-x.eu>. With the COWEB project, capacity building activities will be rolled out to the entire Western Balkans region beginning in February 2023.

In their needs report, Vladi et al. (2020) showed a high need for academic staff to be trained and to gather experience to realize international online modules. In addition to the conception and implementation, it is also necessary to create an acceptance of digital teaching and an adaptation of legal frameworks concerning the better acceptance of virtual learning in Albania. The experiences in the form of pedagogical patterns of the VALEU-X project can also be accessed in Shqip under the above link. Further material in the Albanian language can also be found at <https://learning.valeu-x.eu>.

#### OER-CODEX

The Erasmus+ project, financed by the European Union, "Open Educational Resources for Collaborative Online & Distance Education and eXchange" was founded in 2022 by 4 Consortium partners from Germany, Slovenia, Lithuania and Austria for three years. The main objective of OER-CODEX is to develop OER course modules, conveying digital teaching and learning methods of online collaborative learning in a blended learning context for higher education (HE) educators. Thereby the project aims to increase the capacity and readiness of HE institutions to manage an effective shift towards digital education. In this context, the project will have three main project result types. First, the methodology to develop OER online course modules, second, 4 clusters of OER online course modules convey competencies in online collaborative learning, structured along the DigiCompEdu framework and a ready-to-use OER collection of online course modules and its respective OER content. Further details on the results are provided on the website of the project <https://www.oer-codex.eu/results>.

Research shows that educators who gained expertise during intensive research in online and blended learning have difficulties conveying their knowledge to other interested parties. There is a lack of international cross-institutional initiatives to implement online and blended learning in a systematic and widely accessible manner. Therefore, there is a need for tools, such as pedagogical patterns, that support the systematization of best practices and make them available to a broader audience. (Bizami et al., 2022)

Both Projects foster open and free access to teaching and training material for international and digital teaching practices in collaboration with other European HEIs.

#### 4. Case Study "Albania's next Unicorn"

The organization and didactical design of the case study started ten months before the kickoff event of the module with a series of job-shadowing events. The eight participating institutions worked out the case study for the module in joint and individual meetings under the guidance of the TU Dresden. This resulted in an interdisciplinary and international module to develop start-up ideas for an eco-tourism platform business model located in Albania. In the following table, the partners, the students, and their field of study, as well as the number of E-Tutors for the Virtual Mobility activity, are shown:

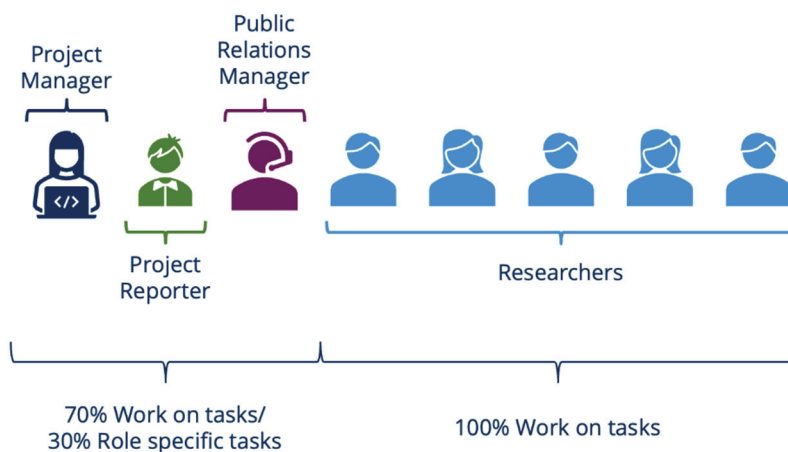
**Table 1: Partner Institution, Students, and E-Tutors enrolled for the pilot module**

Institution	Field of study	Location	Students	E-Tutors
University of Elbasan Aleksandër Xhuvani	Business Administration, Finance, Marketing	Elbasan, Albania	10	2
Aleksander Moisiu University of Durres	Business Administration, English Language	Durrës, Albania	16	2
Fan S. Noli University of Korça	English Language	Korça, Albania	8	2
University of Shkodra	Regional Studies in Geography, Albanian Language and Literature	Shkodra, Albania	12	4
Epoka University	Business Administration	Tirana, Albania	12	4
European University of Tirana	Informatics	Tirana, Albania	12	4
International School for Social and Business Studies Slovenia	Economy and Business Studies	Celje, Slovenia	1	0
Technical University Dresden	Business Administration, Business Informatics, Business Engineering, Business Pedagogics	Dresden, Germany	16	3

The student participants worked in a collaborative online environment supervised by international E-Tutor tandems qualified within the VALEU-X project activities. The case study was designed so that all participating fields of study were considered. Due to the high number of business administration and related disciplines participants, the focus of the case study was set in this area. They were also foreseen for the role of the project manager, creating the project plans and supervising the group work.

For the participants from the linguistic fields of study, the role of the Public Relations Manager was created, who wrote specific texts for the public presentation of products and the company in each weekly phase. Further, the role of the project reporter has been adjusted to the learning goals for this field of study. Besides the report about the group activities and plans on a weekly basis and the documentation of synchronous meetings, this role supports the group in writing, spelling, and grammar issues. Students from Informatics and Regional Studies in Geography acted mainly as researchers. They had specific tasks within the case study instead of their role (e.g., preparing a website or analyzing the landscape concerning the group's business idea). Also, most of the business-related students took the role of the researcher. Market and business analyses were carried out, and a revenue model and a marketing strategy were developed.

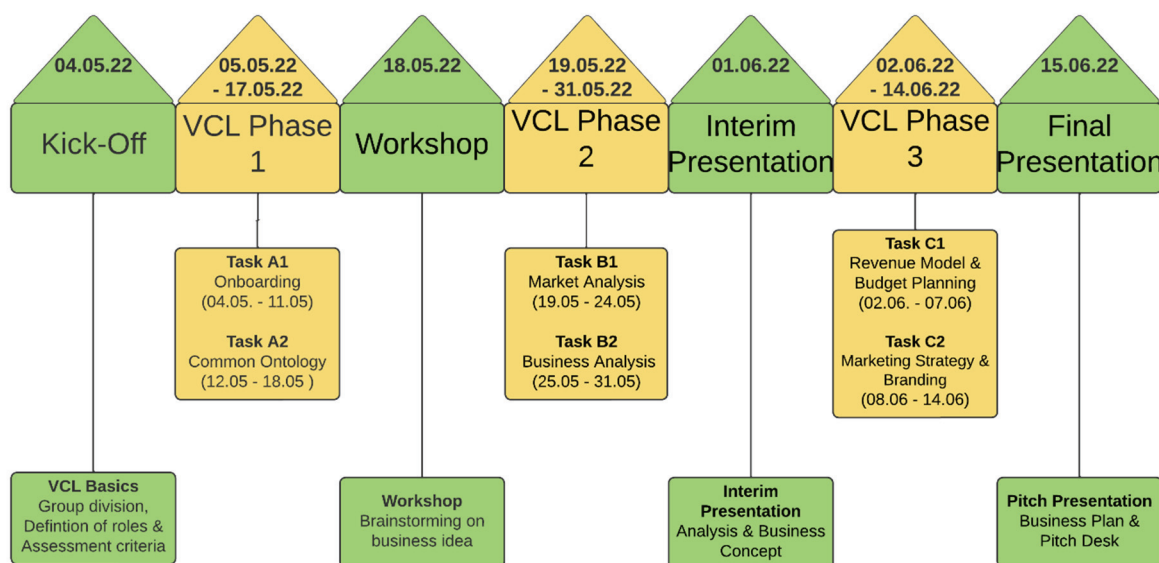
Finally, all participants and roles worked together on the interim and final presentation in pitch format to present to a jury of 15 professors and academics from the participating institutions. The following figure shows the standard role composition within the case study "Albania's next Unicorn":



**Figure 1: Roles within each group of the Virtual Collaborative Learning module (own representation)**

In addition to the different tasks of the roles, they also differ in evaluation. For example, the roles of project manager, project reporter and public relations manager each receive 30% of the rating on fulfilling their role and 70% on the result of the jointly processed tasks. The role of the researcher, on the other hand, is rated 100% on the tasks.

The case study started with a blended mobility kickoff event where the Albanian e-tutors and academics visited the German partner, and the Albanian students participated online. The activity was designed using conference technology, so digital participation was not a disadvantage. During this first synchronous meeting, the participants were divided into small groups and familiarized with the case study. The following figure shows the phases of the case study with green (synchronous phases) and yellow (asynchronous phases) bars:



**Figure 2: Timeline of the Virtual Collaborative Learning Module "Albania's next Unicorn" (own representation)**

In the first VCL phase, the groups first developed a joint group working contract and, the next week, built a common ontology in the context of the case study. It is essential for interdisciplinary modules. This phase was followed by the first workshop in which the groups conducted a guided brainstorming session using all the tools available on the platform. In the second asynchronous VCL phase, the market and business analyses were already related to the previously developed business idea presented in Workshop 2. Finally, the third VCL phase included the addition of the revenue model and the marketing and branding strategy, as well as creating a final pitch deck to present the business idea in front of a panel of 15 academics and professors from the participating HEIs. They had no influence on the final grade of the students but gave their assessment for each presentation in an evaluation form, and the best group was chosen to participate in a 5-day Staff Observation Visit as part of the VALEU-X project.

## 5. Challenges during Implementation

The confrontation of diverse cultures during collaboration can lead to misunderstandings, as each team member works according to cultural norms that may cause conflict among themselves (Presbitero & Toledano, 2018). For this reason, cultural differences represent a key challenge in virtual multicultural collaboration. These had to be managed not only in the participants' respective teams when problems occurred but equally in the e-tutor tandem. Different expectations and attitudes had to be brought together within a team to reduce possible prejudices and achieve smooth cooperation.

The cultural diversity of the participants was created by the different institutions working together in this collaboration. The number of participating institutions led to another challenge, a high dropout rate. During the implementation of the collaboration, some students decided to change their plans and left the module. This increased the management effort of the module supervisors to compensate for the created inequality in the groups. In addition, the group assignment processing was complicated by departing and new members. Additional effects were also evident within the group, which presented challenges, for example, social loafing, which describes "the tendency for individuals to expend less effort when working collectively than when working individually" (Karau & Williams, 1993).

Furthermore, there was a blurring of boundaries regarding which responsibilities lay with the group and with the tutor. These unclear responsibilities and role expectations created another challenge to manage. Moreover, there were also uncertainties about the distribution of tasks and roles between the tutors within a tandem. The qualification as a tutor took place in advance to guarantee their competencies. During the qualification, the challenge of actively involving the tutors in practical tasks and encouraging them to cooperate became apparent.

Based on the challenges that arose in the run-up to and during the implementation of the module, pedagogical patterns are created in the following, which propose solutions to prevent or avoid difficulties in such and similar collaboration.

## 6. Pedagogical Patterns

The pedagogical patterns presented here will focus on the challenge of the high dropout rate, the blurring of boundaries in the e-tutor tandem, and the lack of participation in the e-tutor qualification.

As previously described, students decide to leave the module during the first weeks of online collaboration. This led to an imbalance in group structures and the need for group re-arrangements and, thus, a complicated assessment of those groups. In the framework of the International virtual Collaborative Learning Module and participant management, the following solution for the described problem regarding the dropout-management is proposed. Student commitment should be fostered before the virtual phase starts. This could be achieved through fixed enrolment and ensuring ECTS recognition for students of all participating institutions. Moreover, intensive preparation with academic staff and students for pilot modules and synchronous sessions at the beginning of the module can also reduce the problem. This pattern is related to the preparation as well as the assessment of the module.

In connection with the preparation for the module, the pattern of adjustment of the e-tutor qualification is also proposed. The problem is that many e-tutors join the qualification via MS Teams. However, they remain mostly silent and sometimes do not respond as well as the difficulties to engage e-tutors in active participation in practical tasks. Besides the framework of the international virtual collaborative learning module, the pattern also fits in the framework of e-tutor qualification. There are several possible solutions for the problem described. Before the qualification starts, there should be rules established for communication (e.g., Cameras must be switched on during the qualification).

Moreover, expectation management beforehand helps to make clear which workload is predicted and if it is compatible with the expectations of the participants. During the qualification, multiple-choice tests should be carried out to check the status of knowledge of the prospective tutors. To enhance the engagement of the participants, interactive materials (e.g., gamification elements and videos) should be provided. Furthermore, certificates should only be issued to e-tutors who were actively engaged during the qualification process. This

pattern is also connected to the third pattern, which is presented here, the organization of the e-tutor-tandem.

As previously described, additional challenges have arisen in the framework of the International Virtual Collaborative Learning module and e-tutor management. The problem here was that the role and responsibilities of an e-tutor were not clear to everyone. Some tutors provided content support or worked on the content with the participants. In addition, the distribution of tasks and roles within the tandem pair was not clear. There were sometimes large imbalances in the tandem in terms of task distribution. In this pattern, the solution of expectation management also arises. This, in combination with the assigning of clear responsibilities and the preparation of the tandem contract before the start of the collaboration, helps to prevent imbalances within the tandem and supports a fair distribution of tasks. A supplementary guide with the essential information additionally ensures that everyone has a fundamentally equal starting point. During cooperation in tandem, weekly team meetings (or short surveys) are recommended to evaluate the work in tandem. This allows mutual feedback on the collaboration to be obtained and evaluated to determine if changes are needed. This pedagogical pattern is related to the preparation of the module, e-tutor-qualification, and group work.

**Table 2: Summary of the three proposed patterns**

Name of the pattern	Main problem	Framework	Solution	Link
<i>Dropout-Management</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students leave the modules after being allocated to a group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>International virtual collaborative learning modules</li> <li>participant management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Foster student commitment</li> <li>synchronous meetings at the beginning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Preparation of the module</li> <li>assessment</li> </ul>
<i>Adjustment of the e-tutor qualification</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Missing student engagement during the online e-tutor qualification</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>International virtual collaborative learning modules</li> <li>e-tutor qualification</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communication rules</li> <li>expectation management</li> <li>interactive materials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Preparation of the module</li> <li>organization of the e-tutor tandem</li> </ul>
<i>Organization of the e-tutor-tandem</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unclear distribution of responsibility and roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>International virtual collaborative learning modules</li> <li>e-tutor-management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expectation management</li> <li>assignment of tasks</li> <li>feedback from the team</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Preparation of the module</li> <li>e-tutor qualification</li> <li>group work</li> </ul>

## 7. Conclusion

The following paper aims to contribute the Lessons Learned from an international and interdisciplinary Virtual Mobility module with eight participating institutions. Due to the high number of actors involved, different cultural backgrounds on the student and staff level, and a combination of various disciplines, the project implementation was accompanied by obstacles that had to be overcome to ensure the module's success. Based on these challenges, the underlying paper captured the best practices and proposed pedagogical patterns that referred to three main categories: dropout management, adjustment of the e-tutor qualification and organization of the e-tutor tandem.



Generally, it can be observed that the piloting phase of international, intercultural and interdisciplinary modules requires intensive preparation from both academic staff and students. The expectation management in all areas of cooperation is highly relevant at this point, especially in the presence of cultural differences. The partner universities must have a common understanding of the project objectives, workload and outcomes. Also, it is essential to communicate it clearly to the students and commit to investing considerable time in the module even after the completion of the piloting phase to support the process and correct possible inaccuracies. To minimize the dropout rates, educators can foster student commitment before the start of the virtual phase and propose early enrollment dates.

Next, the e-tutor qualification must include communication rules to ensure the group's active participation. Such rules can include, for example, switching on the cameras or presenting at least one task. Also, the certificates should be issued only to e-tutors actively engaged during the qualification process. As an outlook for future research, it can be recommended to embed the activities of e-tutor qualification into the bigger picture of participants' future career paths. This can be achieved by explaining how they can utilize the skills of e-tutors in their upcoming jobs. For example, the ability to give feedback (one of the responsibilities of an e-tutor) will be necessary for leadership positions and communication with employees. Also, regular feedback within the e-tutor tandem can improve the quality of the work and prepare e-tutors for potential strategic partnerships in the future.

To conclude this paper, it is essential to mention that project synergies should be fostered further. Due to the cultural complexity of such collaborations, knowledge-sharing events and synchronized on-site visits allow partners, academic staff and students to come together and benefit from this diversity and turn challenges into new avenues of a unique experience.

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